

HONOR AND IDOLATRY.

A SERMON

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BY

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"This people honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."—MATT. xv., 8, 9.

And in another version, Isaiah xxix., 13.

JESUS describes what is passing around him. Enthusiastic crowds of Galileans listen with delight to what he says, and then go back to their homes to do much as they did before. And here, in the moment when he speaks, he is in sharp conflict with a troop of smooth-spoken spies from the city, glad to catch him in his talk, if they can. They are over-civil, even, in their manner, perhaps a little as one is apt to over-do respect, when he talks to a crazy man. They honor God with their lips; but, as to his real empire over the world, they are at best indifferent. To describe them, Jesus uses the words with which Isaiah described their fathers seven hundred years before.

As it happens, and perhaps, as he foresaw, he describes precisely the way in which the world was going to treat him. More and more did the passion grow for honoring him—with the lips. Honor passed through all the stages of human veneration, and then passed beyond them. Worship passed from the worship of a teacher, even from the worship of an emperor, to the worship of a God. The Nazarene carpenter—whom his own townsmen turned out of the meeting-house, whom his countrymen wanted to stone, and did at last crucify—was lifted, by after-ages of lip-service, to sit on the throne of God as God's equal, and at last to be worshipped as God himself. Yes, and of the men who did this he would say so sadly, "Why call me *Lord, Lord*, and do not the things which I say?" The humblest vine-dresser who gave him a cup of cold water, in thankfulness for his tenderness to a child, was more apt to do the things that he said than those purpled and crimsoned bishops, who, in their liturgies, bent their heads in reverence of his name.

Such experience is not without parallel in other affairs of

men. The history of human sovereignty repeats it in one or another form not widely differing from each other. Charles the Great of France conquers Europe, and his court is the grandest in the world. In the course of a century or two, his descendants receive all the honors he received, and more. But honors are not power. And, while the sovereign sits almost fettered on the throne, some master of the palace orders the troops here and there; and the poor sovereign cannot so much as send a message across his own kingdom. The Japanese for the last two centuries, up to our own time, had reduced this thing to a perfect system. The emperor, supreme in rank, if rank were all, was venerated as not even gods were venerated. At one time, he sat motionless for hours every morning on the imperial throne, thus to typify and to preserve the peace of his kingdom. If he turned to look right or left, by misfortune, calamity was threatened by his imprudence. His food was brought to him in new vessels every day. And, once in seven years, the acting sovereign of Japan made him a state visit, with every expression of homage. From time to time, in the intervals, the same acting sovereign sent him embassies with presents. But, all this time, this supreme emperor, so called, this High Gate, or Mikado, who represented the dynasty which for more than two thousand years had held the rule in Japan, had not a shred of power. He could not appoint a servant in his own household. Far less could he send a soldier here or enforce an edict there. Such luxuries as power and command belonged to the tycoon and to other "inferior" princes.

To precisely such barren homage did men reduce Jesus Christ in the course of ages. Throne? Yes! King of kings and Lord of lords, if calling him King and Lord would answer; "Very God," if a sounding name will answer. But, when any son of man would know what he said, proposed, wished, or prayed for, that son of man must go, not to him, but to his viceroy. For a thousand years, the Pope of Rome held this viceroyship for Western Europe, and the patriarchs of the Greek Church for Eastern Europe; and whoever needed help or direction went to them. And, when this awful tycoonship broke down, still, for two or three hundred years, a host of inferior princes have struggled for the same viceroyship, and, under the forms of one or another infallible Church, have kept men parted alike from Saviour and from God.

All this time, these people — prince, bishop, priest, and all — revered him with their lips, called him “Lord, Lord,” rendered to him every form of homage. To this hour, men shall bow their heads in the creed when his name is named, who, before the same service is over, shall acknowledge that some viceroy of human imperfection is to interpret his instructions, and administer religion in his name. But suppose I go to such viceroys or vicars. How much do I learn,— whether of his spoken instructions,— or how much even of the spirit of his life do I imbibe? Suppose you had an eager pupil, not harassed by scepticism, certain in his regard and love, who wanted only to reproduce Christ’s work in this end of this nineteenth century. The last thing you would do with him, if you knew what you were about, would be to set him upon studying the proclamations of Popes. Nay, the worst thing you could set him to would be the study of Calvin’s Institutes, or of the canons of any Church now existing. If you do know what you are about, and what he wants, your wisest course is to show him the men and women who have shown the most moral force in history,— who, as we wisely say, are most Christ-like. Show him the steadiness and perseverance of John Eliot. Show him the faith of Saint Francis. Show him the quaint good sense of Oberlin. Show him the tenderness and resolution of Mary Ware. Show him the daring of Selwyn. Show him the breadth of purpose of Xavier. Let him find out that to be a follower of Christ is to carry manhood to the highest power, to work out the highest heroism of the hero, the finest chivalry of the gentleman,—that all these things follow to the son of God. And if, by such lesser examples, you bring him to the central example, if he find there the most tenderness, the most manly manliness, the most chivalrous chivalry, and the noblest triumph, why he will learn the “noble lesson” which the first and best of the world have learned, exactly as they learned it. Sad enough that he is not led to it by any men, because they are honoring Christ with their lips! That service is worthless, unless they are honoring him in their lives.

The true way to honor Christ is to follow him. Do as he did. Then you show that you love him, and hold him in reverence. See him as he was, and do not bury him behind your purple robes,—no, nor crown him with your thorny crowns,—no, nor give him a reed for his sceptre. That was

what Pilate did ; and how many men have done it since who pretended to revere him ! He needs no monarch's robe to give him command. He needs no crown and no sceptre. He leads because he is leader. And when you see him as he is, and know him as he is, you will follow.

The living generation of men has undertaken, in good faith, to produce Jesus Christ again to the world he served. From the beginning, in nineteen centuries, there has been no such loyal effort to show him as he was as we have seen in the last fifty years. This work has wrought much destruction of what had been called sacred. There was some necessary dust and much noise, as the scaffolds and upholstery of centuries were pulled down. Criticism has been sometimes irreverent, and often foolish. But the result is that men know Jesus Christ the better, and the result will be that they will know him more. They honor him more, even if they worship him less. I spoke here three months ago of this determined Christian realism of our time, the resolution "to see with the eyes of those that looked on." I read that day from Mrs. Greenough's poem of Mary Magdalene, one of the recent efforts to tell the story in this realistic way. Well, the next morning I sent the copy of that poem which I had here to a distant city. God so ordered that the pretty volume fell into the hands of a woman wholly broken down in the vice which men say is most incurable. My friend, who had the book, had been pleading with this poor creature ; and, with the hardness of despair, the girl had bidden her go her way, and had said, "I have chosen mine." But, as God ordered, at the same moment the girl took this book from her, and read it. When she had read it, that very night she said to the Christian friend who lent it : "Where you lead, I will follow. What you ask, I will do." That softening of a rebellious heart, that readiness to follow Jesus Christ, was what came to her when for the first time, probably, in her life she was able to get some glimpse of what he was. I dare say she had bowed her head in the creed. I think very likely that she had been taught to repeat, that

"The Son, which is the Word of the Father, begotten from Everlasting of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man's nature."

But neither the act of homage nor the statement of doctrine had saved her from temptation or had loosened the power of sin. When she saw what his way of saving people was, she chose that way of salvation. She did not love her

sin. Poor wretch, nobody knew better than she the depths to which it sunk her. And when she saw him, and when she knew something of that life, she yielded herself to it as those did in his day, of whom the whole record is they "turned and followed."

It is almost a thing of certainty that, as the world chooses thus to take its Saviour by the hand and to look in his face, we shall hear the complaint that we treat him with irreverence. "Master, rebuke the multitude." This is what the people, fond of outside pageantry, said then; and what they say now. Of this remarkable book of Dr. Clarke's, *The Legend of Thomas Didymus*, we shall be told that he takes undue liberties with the person and character of Jesus Christ. "He has placed words in the Saviour's lips which we do not find in St. John." Yes; and did not St. John tell you that he had only written a fragment of the history? So a chambermaid of Queen Elizabeth might complain that the royal robes of State were hung in the closets and that the throne-room looks dreary, when the Queen dresses herself for service and rides out to command her army. So the priests of Apollo did complain that no man came to do sacrifice before the Image of the Sun, when the rejoicing world had gone after the Son of Righteousness. The habit of the first school of painters was to invest Christ's figure with different raiment and coloring from that which became a man. Later down, a sacred "glory" had to be painted around his head. And to this hour there is scarcely a picture of him which is not either too soft to be strong or too rugged to be tender. Whoever does try to lead us to a more real sense of his manhood, which is to show us better how divine he is, must not dread such criticism. He must do his best, that we may see the most tender tenderness, the most rugged manhood, the most firm resolution, the most living life. Then only do we know why and how he moved the young man who had great possessions, the poor woman of Tyre, the tax-gatherer at his office, or the centurion at the cross. Into the market-place of Capernaum, or under the shade of the orchard in the country here, came one whom men called the carpenter of Nazareth. The children were not afraid of him, for his welcome was such as they had never known before. Young men and women talked with him, found him cordial, sympathetic, so wise, and so hearty. Puzzled people, who had handled back and forth all the problems, talked with him. He was not puzzled,

and to him there were no problems. Timid people talked to him, and found him all courage. Sick people talked to him, and found such vitality as was a fountain of health. Some of these people were so fascinated that they could not leave him. What he did, they tried to do. What he said, they tried to obey. He wanted them for a purpose he had in hand, and to that purpose they devoted themselves.

The purpose was to make all men and women like him,—more manly, more womanly,—till they were perfect as is the living God. Of all that company, the one who knew him best was sure to be the one most like him; who knew him best, was sure to be the one who followed most heartily; who knew him best, was sure to be the one who succeeded most completely. Yes; and he who knew him best would certainly honor him most as he would wish to be honored. It might not be by calling him “Very God of the substance of God”; it might not be by clothing him with a robe of purple; it would not be by banishing him to sit in majesty on some secluded throne. Honor would come where obedience was rendered; and when Oberlin made light shine in darkness, when John Eliot buried the tomahawk, when Mary Ware watched by the dying peasants at Osmotherley, then was it and thus was it that they rendered to him the fit and only homage.

It has been my good fortune once and again to know the pupils of a great artist, who loved him, honored him, and would have died for him. I have known the aides of a great general, who believed in him, honored him, and would gladly die for him. I have had the good fortune to know men who loved great women with all the passion and energy of life; and I have known women who, with all the passion and energy of life, loved great men. But never, in any such cases of life enlivened by life, does he who so drinks at the fountain expect to honor fitly with the lips him or her who has so quickened life and inflamed passion. Always, where passion is perfect and life is true, always this is the wish and prayer: O God, that I may be worthy of that which he has been to me! O God, that I may do something to show him that I apprehend and comprehend! O God, help me to carry out his purpose! Help me, indeed, to make real the life which from him I have derived. Well! Is that the law of life in these separate instructions and inspirations? All the more is it the law of life when Mary or Martha sit at Jesus’ feet, when Mary Magdalene finds the devils are cast out,

when Simon and Matthew find what life is and what it is for. Those men and women do not go about shouting "Hosanna!" They are not constructing creeds,—nay, they are not so much as writing hymns. Hymns write themselves, and creeds compose themselves. They are not taking thought how they shall best build him a monument. Rather, with all their might would they live in his life, and carry out his unfinished plan.

This is as true to-day as it was then. Nor does the detail seem difficult. No man need say the days of miracle are gone who sees how one act of love repeats itself to-day, or how any loving life lifts up what is fallen down, just as his did. You and I cannot work his miracles, you say. Then we must work ours. There are no lepers for us to cleanse, but there is dirt enough all around us for our cleaning,—homes grimy with dirt, which you and I might make cheerful; nay, hearts impure, which you and I might sweeten and freshen. He opened the eyes of the blind. Yes; and there is not one of us but may provide one page more for the reading of the long midnight of these brothers and sisters of ours whom we vainly teach to read if, when their fingers can trace the letter on the page, there are no letters for their tracing. He cast out devils in his exceeding love. And you and I,—are we sure we have exhausted all our power in that direction? He made another place of that Samaritan village; he made another woman of that Samaritan outcast. And you and I? How many outcasts from other lands cross our lives every day! And have we tenderly and manfully done all we can do for them? He gave to sinners new courage, because he had hand and word and promise for them all. There are enough left for us to try the same experiment.

And all this may be without a man's once bowing head in his honor; nay, without a man's naming his name. What does he care for that? "Blaspheme me, if you choose," he says proudly to the world: "that is easily forgiven." Only carry forward the work. Build up the perfect kingdom. Come yourself to his Father, as he came, and do the thing he did. No fear but there will be sufficient honor. Yes, the honor most grateful, when all tears shall be wiped from all eyes, when every man shall sit under his own vine and fig-tree, when God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.